

In celebration of the American dream

In 1978, Congress passed a joint Congressional Resolution to commemorate the first week of May as Asian/Pacific American Heritage Week. Thereafter, in May 1992, the entire month of May was designated as "Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month."

During the celebrations in the month of May, different Asian communities celebrate the importance and accomplishments of their respective cultures with a pageantry of festivals and government sponsored educational

activities.



Tony Pham,
Guest Columnist

However, I wanted to expand upon the celebration of what it means to be not just an Asian-American but an American of Asian heritage. I do so by sharing our journey to and in this wonderful nation with the hopes that in reading this, our children can understand how people from different backgrounds contribute to the beautiful tapestry of the American experience.

In doing so, I honor the sacrifices of my parents and the thousands of military personnel who fought for our nation's freedoms.

In April of 1975, my mother boarded a plane in Saigon with a wedding photo album, a bag of clothes and three young children in tow, leaving everything and everyone we knew.

Familiar surroundings, family and friends, were all left to their collective fates as Vietnam fell to Communist control, and her children's lives would never be the same. For a time, we had no home or any country to call our own. However, our family settled in a refugee camp in Ft. Chaffee, Ark. (pictured), where families lived in barracks-style accommodations in hopes that they would be sponsored somewhere in the United States to begin their new lives in their new home.

Beginning anew in Henrico

As fate would have it, we began our journey in Henrico County.

As history would have it, our struggles were just beginning, although the hardest parts were behind us. I grew up in poverty, where a bowl of rice and eggs were considered a feast.

During my formative years, I struggled with my own identity. I looked different, dressed different and definitely sounded different. By day, I took a barrage of racist comments and actions from fellow kids who were afraid of what made us different rather than em-



bracing what we had in common as children.

Comments such as chink, dink and gook were all too commonplace in school. At night, I was raised in a traditional Vietnamese family in all of its glory as I walked that tightrope between both cultures. What I quickly learned was that people have a tendency to dislike and hate things they do not understand rather than have the patience to learn.

However, no matter how difficult my struggles were, what my parents endured was just as difficult. They both worked two minimum wage jobs apiece. My father was a mechanic by day and janitor scrubbing toilets by night. My mother sewed clothes until her fingers and hands hurt.

Feeding three hungry children and putting a roof over their heads was no easy task. They too had to struggle in assimilating to their new home, their new country. English never came easy to them, and as such, their ability to ascend to higher paying professions was limited.

While we never wanted for anything we needed, we never got much of what we wanted. Such is a life of war-torn immigrants searching for a new life in a new home.

However, through our struggles, our parents instilled positives in our lives: education, hard work and integrity. These are all constants that became our identity in America.

In 1985, we proudly became United States citizens. The question of what would be our home was officially answered. I recall that day in the federal

courthouse in Norfolk. I stood with my parents saying the one pledge that I still hold dear to this very day - the Pledge of Allegiance.

Holding onto hope

Fast forward some 30-odd years and I am now a practicing attorney in the Richmond area. I have had the pleasure and honor of serving in many different positions of public trust. My sister became a practicing physician, albeit in Boston. I am married with beautiful biracial children who are now benefiting from having their Ong and Ba in their lives. There is no bitterness, no resentment - just love, faith and hope.

Where else other than these United States could a family of hungry refugees arrive and survive? Where else on this planet could such freedoms and opportunities be so readily available?

Quite frankly, this isn't a story of Asian-American history, but more a story of an American family of Asian heritage struggling to overcome life's adversities. What catapulted them to success was opportunity, faith, family, freedom and most importantly, *hope*.

I now have the watch for my family and my collective community. My hopes are that as young folks read this letter, they recognize and cherish their freedoms. I hope they hold onto the concept of hope.

While no one can foresee what tomorrow will bring, this nation provides everyone with the opportunity to become something great and do even greater things. The American dream still exists and is cemented into our collective history as told by my family's journey to freedom.

If we could achieve our American dream given our circumstances, then the sky is the limit for everyone. As such, let's join together in unity and as a collective community and celebrate the month of May not just as Asian-Americans, but as Americans who all can appreciate the various cultures that make this nation great!

- Tony Pham is an attorney who lives with his wife and two children in Henrico County.

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HENRICO CITIZEN

A newspaper of, by and for the people of Henrico County, Va.

A publication of



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Winner of 160 awards for content and design
Virginia Press Association member

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